



Director of
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Intelligence

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Soviet Perceptions of China's Nuclear Capabilities

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National Intelligence Estimate
Volume I—Key Judgments and Summary

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The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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**SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA'S
NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES**

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VOLUME I—KEY JUDGMENTS AND SUMMARY

Information available as of 4 February 1988 was used in the preparation of this Estimate, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

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SCOPE NOTE

The focus of this study is on Soviet perceptions of the challenge posed by China's growing nuclear capabilities. Therefore, US assessments of Chinese nuclear capabilities have been included only as reference points from which to judge the accuracy or implications of Soviet viewpoints.

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Because no comprehensive Intelligence Community study of this subject has ever been undertaken, a particular effort has been made to investigate its historical context. We believe that such an evaluation is valuable in offering some perspective on the development of the Soviets' attitudes about this subject, as well as in providing some clues about their expectations of the future scope and direction of the Chinese nuclear threat. This Estimate is issued in two volumes.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Chinese strategic forces have been, and will continue to be, a complicating factor in Soviet military planning. Considerations of the Chinese nuclear threat have, however, always been essentially secondary to the Western challenge in Soviet strategic modernization decisions, as well as arms control positions. We judge that, although the Soviet Union regards the PRC as a growing threat, Chinese nuclear capabilities still do not exert a determining influence on Soviet strategic force planning. China's nuclear force, estimated by the Soviets to consist of some 120 ballistic missiles and 450 obsolescent strategic bombers, is still small compared with those of the two superpowers and has been growing only slowly over the past decade. This situation could change, particularly as the PRC begins deployment of increasing numbers of longer range, more flexible strategic systems. Nevertheless, we judge that the Soviets believe that they can retain overwhelming nuclear superiority over the Chinese at any level of conflict well into the next century.

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Although Moscow may at one time have given serious consideration to the possibility of launching a preventive strike against the PRC, since the late 1970s the Soviets have concluded that China possessed a limited second-strike capability. Given the possibilities for improved bilateral relations, as well as growing Chinese nuclear force capabilities, Moscow may now judge that its best response to the Chinese nuclear challenge may be through reducing Sino-Soviet tensions over the long term. Nevertheless, the Soviets entertain no illusions that the basic causes of Sino-Soviet tension will disappear, and they will continue to maintain a substantial nuclear strike capacity against the PRC.

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We judge that, despite Moscow's sustained intelligence effort against the PRC, the Soviet Union has a less complete understanding of China's strategic forces than does the United States, and still has major uncertainties about critical aspects of the PRC's nuclear program, although we freely acknowledge that errors undoubtedly still exist in current US assessments. We also judge that Moscow has a generally accurate picture of the organization and basing of China's missile force,

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Although we cannot be certain, we now believe that the discrepancy between US and Soviet assessments, which has occurred since the mid-1970s, has been due largely to differences in missile counting methodologies.

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The main objective of Soviet military policy toward the PRC has been to deter and intimidate the Chinese. To this end, Moscow has for more than two decades conducted a sustained buildup of its conventional and nuclear forces along the Sino-Soviet border. As a result, Moscow probably believes it can fight and win a war with China at either the conventional or nuclear levels. We judge, however, that the probability of a Sino-Soviet war is low. We also judge that the Soviets would prefer to keep any conflict with the Chinese confined to the conventional level, but would still see substantial risks that any major conflict could escalate to nuclear warfare.

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The Soviets generally view any significant prospect of war with China within the overall framework of a possible global East-West conflict. From Moscow's viewpoint, operations in the Far East would clearly be secondary to the decisive theater of combat in Europe. For this reason, the Soviets would probably be content to assume the strategic defensive in Asia, and limit their operations against the PRC to relatively shallow offensives. Although Moscow would clearly like to avoid simultaneous hostilities against both the United States and China, it seems clear that the Soviets expect such a situation as the most likely war scenario in the Far East.

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As a result of their 20-year buildup of conventional forces along the Chinese border, the Soviets may now believe that in a war with China they would not have to resort to nuclear weapons in order to achieve their limited military objectives. Moreover, the Soviets would be concerned about how the United States and its NATO Allies would react to Soviet nuclear escalation of a Sino-Soviet war, particularly if the Soviets and the West were in a deepening crisis or involved in a conventional war at the same time. Moscow may therefore now assess the stakes in a Sino-Soviet conflict to be too low to justify the risks and complications such nuclear escalation would have for Soviet war plans against the West.

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Although the Soviets would prefer to keep a Sino-Soviet conflict confined to the conventional level, they also realize that strong incentives to escalate would still exist. Moscow probably sees the most likely escalation scenario as Soviet preemption after unambiguous warning of Chinese preparations to launch a nuclear strike. Provided Soviet indications and warning capabilities had not been significantly degraded, the Soviets would probably be able to successfully execute such an attack, though such a strike would not completely disarm Chinese nuclear forces. Moscow might also choose to execute its nuclear strike plan against China in the context of a massive strategic attack against the United States, principally because the Soviets would be uncertain whether nuclear strike assets earmarked for the PRC would survive an intercontinental exchange, and because they would be concerned about China's emerging largely unscathed while the USSR suffered heavy damage in such a war. On the other hand, in such a situation the Soviets might see the avoidance of nuclear hostilities with the Chinese as highly desirable, especially since the task of dealing with the threats from NATO in Europe and Western forces in the Far East would be particularly demanding.

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We judge that an unlikely scenario for nuclear escalation would be Soviet initiation deriving from operational or tactical necessity in a war with the PRC. We believe, however, that Soviet conventional force improvements in the Far East have probably made it less necessary for the Soviets to depend on the nuclear option. A more likely scenario from the Soviet perspective appears to be Chinese initiation to support their military operations.

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The dominant trends in Soviet targeting capabilities against the PRC over the last two decades have been diversification and modernization. While Moscow had few strategic assets available for targeting

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China in the 1960s, today it has a flexible, effective theater-strategic strike force in the Far East. The most important part of this arsenal, in terms of sheer numbers, is the SS-20 IRBM force. We judge that the Soviets will, however, compensate for the loss of the Asian SS-20 force as the result of the INF Treaty by retargeting central strategic systems, such as ICBMs. Because of the necessity of targeting Chinese underground missile storage tunnels, since the late 1970s the Soviets have probably had to allocate a portion of their ICBM force to a peripheral strike mission against China.

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Soviet concerns about China's development of a missile force with sufficient range to hit Moscow were almost certainly a significant factor in Soviet decisions regarding the modernization of the Moscow ABM system in the 1970s. Soviet projections of Chinese capabilities probably agree with US assessments that through the 1990s the PRC will not have the capability to conduct the sort of defense suppression attack against the Pill Box phased-array radar that would be the system's critical vulnerability.

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The most important consequences of these perceptions will be in the areas of Soviet strategy and force planning. Moscow probably does not expect the growth of Chinese nuclear capabilities to require any fundamental reassessment of Soviet strategy in the Far East over at least the next 10 years. Although we cannot be certain, the Soviets probably expect China's ballistic missile force to grow to at most several hundred launchers by the late 1990s. Therefore, we assess that considerations of Chinese strategic power will continue to exert only secondary influences on overall Soviet strategic force planning.

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On balance, we judge that Soviet perceptions of Chinese nuclear capabilities have had, and will continue to have, positive effects for US strategic interests. Because Moscow perceives the growth of Chinese nuclear strength as essentially anti-Soviet, the USSR must consider the "China card" in any planning for a possible war against the West. Therefore, the existence of China's independent nuclear force is a complicating factor in Soviet strategic calculations and introduces an element of uncertainty in Soviet planning that serves to strengthen deterrence overall.

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